

Friday, February 06, 2004

My Turn: Meeting Julia opens doors to the wonders of school reading program

By Arlene Zimmer

It began with a letter addressed to "Dear Community Member" and signed by the principal and assistant principal at Barton Hill Elementary School. Specifically, it was an invitation to become a volunteer for the Wonder of Reading and attend a training session. My husband reminded me that I am always complaining about how children watch so much television and don't read other than what they have to do for homework. And, as is so often the case, guilt works beautifully for almost anyone who wants me to do almost anything.

The three-hour training class was filled with retired teachers and others who had experience in this sort of endeavor. I was an exception. Not having had children, my experience was sorely limited. The distributed materials were comprehensive, and if I studied and practiced the methods I'd be ready in about six months.

It was several weeks later that I received information about the student and set up a time with the teacher to learn more about her.

As I headed for the school office, I began to feel a little intimidated, as I had as a child when I visited such places. I stepped inside and immediately responded to the greeting, "Good morning, ma'am." The fact that this person was at least 30 years my junior didn't seem to ameliorate the old but horribly familiar sense of apprehension.

I had the same reaction when I went to Room 21 and met with my student's teacher. The day and time of my weekly session was agreed upon, Wednesdays from 11 a.m. to noon.

The days and nights before I was to meet with my partner, Julia, were spent agonizing over my capability or lack thereof to inspire a third-grader to be all that she could be. I read and reread the detailed suggestions and instructions. I rehearsed several complimentary and encouraging phrases as though I were about to audition for the starring role in "The Sound of Music."

Then came the big day. Before I left the house I found a notebook along with a pen and pencil set I'd gotten when I was with Western Airlines. At the school, I found several parking spaces next to the playground fence.

As I pinned my name badge on and gathered my accessories, I glanced at some of the children on the playground and wondered if one of them might be Julia.

I signed in at the office, this time affecting an "I know what I'm doing" posture. As it was too early to go to the classroom, I walked to the library and opened the door to hear the sounds of boys and girls reading aloud to one another.

When the library aide had a free moment, I introduced myself and admitted my nervousness. She immediately took up my cause, suggested a book as a start and showed me to an area of the room that was comparatively quiet.

It was time to head for Room 21. I climbed the stairs and headed for the classroom door. I looked in the window. There wasn't a soul in the place. Soon, a bell rang.

I tried to look relaxed and confident as I heard the rush of small shoes banging up the stairs. The third-graders stared at me with curiosity as they hurried through the now open door. As I walked in, the teacher called out, "Julia."

A lovely little student turned and walked toward me. "This is Mrs. Zimmer," the teacher said. "She'll be reading with you today." I responded to the slightly shy smile with what I hoped was a friendly expression. "Let's go to the library."

We entered the room. I walked over to the librarian's desk, picked up the preselected book and guided Julia over to our "private" area. She seemed to be much more relaxed than I felt.

I began by telling her how proud I had been when, also in the third grade, I had been selected to read to the kindergarten class where my brother was a student. Almost 60 years later and he still won't let me forget how embarrassed he was.

She told me about her sisters and brothers; she's the youngest. I learned her birthday is in May. She likes to read, go to movies and has a baby rabbit as a pet.

She also is a swimmer, plays the flute and is on the Barton Hill Drill Team. She has beautiful eyelashes and wonderful dimples. She's bright and sweet.

I pulled out the notebook and writing implements and explained that they were hers to write down any words or ideas that she wanted to remember. She was thrilled with the items and immediately wrote her name on the first page.

Julia began to read the selected book. As she read the title page and came to the author's name, she pronounced his name, which ended in "sky," as though it was the word for that blue area above us all.

I explained that the writer's family probably came from somewhere in Russia and they pronounced the name as "ski." As we read more, there was a description of a sled and the ski on which it rode. When she read this, Julia turned to the title page and pointed to the last three letters of the author's name. This kid is good.

She read on and I was very impressed with her ability with words and her understanding of the meaning in the context of the story. Then she asked me to read a paragraph. I did. When I finished, she complimented me on how well I read. And then she asked, "Will you come every Wednesday to read with me?" Of course I will!

We finished the book just before noon. I placed it back on the shelf and Julia walked over to another area to select a book that we would read the following week.

She opened her notebook and wrote the title and author. As we left the library and walked back to Room 21, I was elated about our first meeting and hoped that she felt the same. We waved goodbye to one another, each beginning a return to our routines.

Arlene Zimmer is a 30-year San Pedro resident and owns a print shop.

Do you have a story to tell? Submit your column to Lisa Donahue, My Turn, *Daily Breeze*, 5215 Torrance Blvd., Torrance, CA 90503-4077, or e-mail us at lisa.donahue@dailybreeze.com. Please limit to 800 words and include your telephone number. We'll pay \$25 for each column we publish.

Publish Date: *January 21, 2004*

Article found on www.dailybreeze.com